

University of Dundee

Philosophical Hermeneutics and Ontology

Davey, Nicholas

Published in:

Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology

DOI:

[10.1080/00071773.2017.1303107](https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2017.1303107)

Publication date:

2017

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Davey, N. (2017). Philosophical Hermeneutics and Ontology. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 48(3). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2017.1303107>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in Discovery Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from Discovery Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



University of Dundee

Philosophical Hermeneutics and Ontology

Davey, Jeremy

Published in:
Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology

Publication date:
2017

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Davey, J. (2017). Philosophical Hermeneutics and Ontology. Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in Discovery Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from Discovery Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Philosophical Hermeneutics and Ontology

In his contribution to this collection of papers, Gaetano Chiurazzi offers an essay on “The Ontology of Hermeneutical Practice” which refers to hermeneutics as a “universality without domain.” For the sake of this introduction, we will reverse the equation and speak of domains without specifiable universality. Chiurazzi’s notion is an apt way of formulating a formal characteristic of hermeneutics, the humanities and related practices that pursue conceptual subject-matters whose nature is not fixed but historically accrued. Hermeneutics and its affiliates are not closed fields of enquiry but emergent modes of intellectual practice whose character or “essence” is continually altered and expanded by application. In formal terms, hermeneutics is an open field of enquiry, a domain which cannot be limited by any pre-established definition. What hermeneutics is and can become remains an open question. Possible responses to the question can only be sensed in on-going, revealing, but never conclusive debate. Such dialogical engagement and participation guarantees hermeneutics its continuing power to historically effect.

The notion of hermeneutics as an open domain without closed universality offers an appropriate vantage from which to introduce this body of work on Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. Although each essay offers a different perspective on aspects of his position, none represent it definitively. Philosophical hermeneutics is an open domain of enquiry whose characteristics cannot be fully specified. There is ample evidence of this claim within philosophical hermeneutics itself. It is not susceptible to complete conceptual description. What it has become known as is a consequence of on-going historical narratives which can never by definition be complete. The history of understanding and its interpretation is on-going. There is, therefore, no reason to suppose that what has become known as philosophical hermeneutics is exhaustive. It remains an open domain, incomplete but always capable of a completer rendition.

Philosophical hermeneutics may be an open domain but its general character can be surmised from the history of its effects. Though the conception of a *Wirkungsgeschichte* is close to Gadamer’s heart, the history of a concept’s effects can itself never be definitive. The issue here is not the epistemological finitude of historical understanding *per se* but its ontological character, that is, the on-going and hence incomplete nature of historical disclosure. Philosophical hermeneutics is heavily dependent upon Heidegger’s ontological conception of understanding. This is particularly manifest in Gadamer’s conception of “linguistically” or *Sprachlichkeit*. Language too is an open domain: What will become effective configurations of a meaning-cluster are invariably working towards us from the past. Yet what those configurations reveal will be dependent upon unknown circumstances approaching us from the future that will, in turn, influence the manner of their disclosure. It is the nature of the history of effects to be always underway and to remain open to as yet unrealised potentials of

meaning. In Heidegger's terms, what interpretation draws out is an effect of the potentials within understanding itself. In other words, the historical effect makes known the presence of the unknown. It follows that though a history of conceptual effects can and does reveal aspects of the domain we call philosophical hermeneutics it also discloses that such a domain never be brought to reflection in its entirety.

These comments emphasise that philosophical hermeneutics is not a specifiable theory or philosophy of understanding but primarily a mode of reflecting upon what is already at play within communicative practices and the experiences of meaning they facilitate. A perspectival approach to experience necessarily widens the subjective horizons which characterise individual consciousness. A dialogical approach to experience broadens an awareness of the effects at play within it and that expansion adds to the collective reality of the subject-matters which shape individual experience. Given that philosophical hermeneutics is indeed an open domain, a perspectival, dialogical, and participatory approach to its concerns is not only an appropriate philosophical approach to the discipline but also potentially extends its cultural and intellectual effects.

The essays in this collection all attest to the diverse intellectual effects of philosophical hermeneutics. John Arthos's piece "Out of the Cave of the Cyclops" offers a powerful case for considering hermeneutics as a mode of rhetorical reasoning that operates independently of the cyclopic tendency of modern methodological reasoning. In Gadamer's *Truth and Method* the opposition between scientific reasoning and hermeneutical reasoning collapses into a binary. The question that Arthos's presentation is sensitive to is what happens to a culture and its educational institutions when belief in the unquestionable nature of scientific truth and reasoning is abandoned. Arthos's essay has proved prescient in that it was written just months before the UK Referendum on Europe and the Presidential Election in the U.S.A. At a time when there is a broad scepticism regarding what Nietzsche called the "big words" in politics and morality, the skill of discerning and navigating the gaps between what a speaker is saying and the meaning of what is said could not be politically more relevant. The fact that there is no longer a final arbiter with regard to the "truth" of an interpretation strengthens the case for hermeneutics as a rhetorical skill. It emphasises the need for discernment and judgement, for finding in a climate of uncertainty the most reasonable case amongst many for a position we will have to act on. Patient, responsible and discerning reading and the skill to both move between and, depending upon the circumstances, to choose between various patterns of reasoning is what hermeneutics considered as a rhetorical skill can offer contemporary educational institutions.

Gaetano Chiurazzi's paper "Universality without Domain: The Ontology of Hermeneutical Practice" follows Arthos's contribution in a precise way. Whereas the latter puts a broad case for hermeneutics to be considered as a rhetorical domain, Chiurazzi's paper offers an acute

analysis of the specific logical structure of the fundamental concepts within the humanities as opposed to those of physics and mathematics. Their very openness proves crucial. In this respect the author notes that “the ethical message which crosses the whole project of *Truth and Method* can then be summed up in the idea that there is a certain *excess* of the experience of the human sciences in comparison to every fixed and controlled domain of the methodical sciences.” In *Truth and Method* Gadamer describes the process of translation as a process that though it may aspire to be as loyal as possible to an original text, always confronts us with the impossibility of completely rendering the sense of a text in translation: a difference always remains. The translator is confronted with a semantic excess for which the target language has no word, forcing a choice: she must determine—or rationalize—this relative indeterminacy, which appears in relation to the target language but certainly not in relation to the source language. “In our translation if we want to emphasise a feature of the original that is important to us, then we can do so only by playing down or entirely suppressing other features. But this is precisely the activity that we call interpretation. Translation, like all interpretation, is a highlighting. A translator must understand that highlighting is part of his task. Obviously he must not leave open whatever is not clear to him. He must show his colours.” Nevertheless, this openness is part of the very strength of hermeneutical reasoning. Precisely because the domain of its terms are open rather than closed, every new interpretation adds to its subject-matter. Chiurazzi’s key claim is that in hermeneutics and the humanities the constitution of the universal is not founded on repetition, abstraction and induction—as it is in scientific knowledge—but upon integration and increase. Within hermeneutics “more universal is not what presents a lesser number of connotations, but on the contrary, what presents a greater number of intensional characters or determinations.” That hermeneutics has an excess of meaning, that no translation can be reduced to another and that no interpretation can be logically commensurate with its subject-matter affirm the the impossibility of hermeneutics but, on the contrary, demonstrates its vital importance. Only through constant engagement with interpretation and translation can the consequent generation of differences increase and magnify the cultural universals constituted and transmitted by hermeneutics.

Nicholas Davey’s contribution “The Impossible Future of Hermeneutics” deals with a related set of methodological issues. The essay argues that deconstructive and post-structuralist criticism is in many respects justified in its formal attack on hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is in need of re-thinking as Arthos points out, but the mode of deconstruction’s criticism is theoretically skewed and obscures what can be meaningfully re-constructed in the discipline. Deconstructive criticism is not incorrect: it is right to insist that there can be no final interpretation but where it goes wrong concerns a failure of its own making. Critics of hermeneutics often fail to grasp that what it perceived as a disabling limit to interpretation is infact the enabling presupposition of the endlessly transformative nature of interpretation. Deconstructive thought cannot criticise philosophical hermeneutics for failing to get to the bottom of things since the very supposition of final meaning is itself erroneous. What

deconstruction identifies as the formal impossibility of hermeneutics actually establishes the practical possibility of hermeneutics. What delimits and seemingly negates the formal possibility of hermeneutics - the inability of interpretation to exhaust the infinite determinations of its object - in fact enables hermeneutics to extend its finite understandings infinitely. Completeness and infinity are not features of understandable objects but of the endlessly repeatable processes of understanding themselves. If hermeneutic understanding were understood as just the linear progress towards an ever more accurate account of a final truth, no recursive looping would be possible. As a consequence, the reflective understanding which emerges from recursive looping could not itself occur. Thus, the points of continuity and difference, the development of narrative patterns and points of re-appraisal which constitute the emergence of hermeneutic consciousness would not themselves arise. In other words, hermeneutic understanding depends upon the endless recurrence of non-identical processes of repetition. Hermeneutic truth is not arrived at as the intended terminus of a methodological enquiry. Rather *hermeneutic truth is a practice based emergence*, the adjunctive effect of recursive looping within a given practice. Deconstructive criticism of hermeneutics for failing to ever arrive at the truth is dangerous not because its claim is wrong but because it blurs what is really at stake, i.e. promoting the conditions which enable the emergence of hermeneutic truths. Philosophical hermeneutics responds to Nietzsche's question concerning the value of truth: the 'truth' is valuable not in-itself but for what its pursuit gives rise to, namely, the unexpected and potentially transformative emergence of hermeneutic insight into our own mode of being.

Ontology and the question of effects continue to have a very strong presence in Jan Iver Linden's paper 'Causality, Action and Effective History'. Chiurrazi's and Davey's papers both acknowledge how philosophical hermeneutics is profoundly grounded in Heidegger's ontological revolution i.e. that understanding *is* a mode of our being and consequently extends far beyond what we think of it as being. Linden's essay explores the implications of this argument for the hermeneutical grasp of history,

For Linden history offers a particular challenge for hermeneutical understanding. Customarily, history is juxtaposed with nature as without its opposite history is reduced to being only a matter of human culture. However this erroneous binary masks the fact that culture is *a mode of being* and that such a particular way of being is not something we can locate. It has no spatial place, because culture is a way of being disposed to place. The implication of prioritising ontology here suggests that there can be no distinct demarcation between what is cultural and what is another non-cultural sphere of reality. Linden grasps the point clearly: reality is already at work *inside* our cultural world, or to put it more precisely: there is nothing in culture which makes it possible to locate it inside a border. Culture is not a human space inside reality, but a specific human way of inhering in reality. This also

suggests that nature cannot be regarded as something external to culture, but must be understood as a specific aspect of our cultural world. Linden names this aspect *life* suggesting in the fashion of Spinoza's idea of a *natura naturans*: a creative process, which brings itself to expression¹ in history. Linden suggests that inside this singular historical process, in which the now turns possibilities into given irrevocabilities, there are multiple strains, nuances, and variations which render the life process complex and rich in meaning. The key argument becomes clear. "For objectivistic conceptions of reality this means that their epistemic claims can have validity only inside an orientation which has opted for objectification as its main strategy. Such a strategy is meaningful and in several contexts also legitimate because of the aims and ends presupposed – but itself, it can never be understood through the objective sphere which it has constituted. What can be understood is however the constellation of ends, motives, research activity and results, i. e. the specific modality of being in such manifestations of reality." We inhere in reality in several ways, and though epistemic mode is an essential one it is not the only one.

For Linden to understand processural history requires not an ever finer determination of historical cause and effect but a discernment of what such a history reveals ontically, its structural patterns and their enabling importance. History should interest us not as a body of epistemic objectifications but for it reveals of our concerns as temporal modes of being in the world. The ontological importance of history for hermeneutics lies in the fact that it brings to expression patterns of reality as it is lived and thereby extends our sense of the world we live in.

Linden's argument has a clear theme that carries over into Cynthia Nielson's essay "Gadamer and Scholz on Solidarity: Disclosing, Avowing, and Performing Solidaristic Ties with Human and Natural Others." Linden reminds us that, ontologically speaking, it is not the events described in historical scholarship that are primary but rather the prior orientation of concerns - or way of being - whose nature manifests itself in and through how historical events are described. Historical scholarship makes manifest a way of being that tracks and traces itself in the world through previously established patterns of temporal continuity and discontinuity. The character of a way of being is discerned through what it brings to light in its sense-making practices. Nielson's approach to Gadamer's practical

¹ Cf. G. Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1968.

philosophy is not to announce or advocate a moral or political conception of solidarity but to discern its ontological presence in and through the diversity of human engagements.

It is plain that in talking of practice in relationship to hermeneutics, Nielson is not talking about practical philosophy as it has been predominantly conceived since Kant. To speak of a philosopher's practical philosophy is generally to draw attention to his or her moral philosophy. Robert Pippin's book on *Hegel's Practical Philosophy* makes this perfectly clear: "by practical philosophy most philosophers would mean an account of the distinct sort of events for which we may appropriately demand reasons or justifications from subjects whom we take to be responsible for such events."² If the meaning of practical philosophy is read ethically, it might initially seem that Gadamer's has surprisingly little to do with such debates. Authors such as Matthew Foster asks specifically why does Gadamer remain "remain silent about much that is critical important to the viability of practical philosophy?"³ An illuminating and fitting answer is suggested by David Cooper. Speaking of Heidegger and Wittgenstein in the context of Ancient Chinese Philosophy he makes a remark that is equally telling of Gadamer.

No doubt these writers have their individual reasons for apparent hostility or indifference to moral discourse. I suspect however that they all share the sense, indicated by the remark from *Tao Te Ching*, that so to speak, ethics comes to late: something has already gone wrong with our lives when pre-occupation with good versus evil, with rights and values, sets in. The Way is already lost, the experience of mystery already forgotten. Be that as it may, and despite these hostile remarks, it is clear that none of these writers is without a perception of how our lives should go. Moreover, there is surely an agreement among them that these should be lives in awareness of the "things that cannot be put into words".⁴

In certain respects Forster is right. Gadamer is silent on what is conventionally understood as normative ethics. The strength of Nielson's paper is to suggest that solidarity is not a political end or moral ideal but rather something that is phenomenologically revealed in and through our practical engagement with an increasingly discovered shared world of concerns. Nielson

² Robert Pippin, *Hegels Ethical Philosophy, Rational Agency as Ethical Life*, London, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p.1.

³ Matthew Foster, *Gadamer and Practical Philosophy*, Georgia, Scholars Press, 1991, p. 240.

⁴ David Cooper, *The Measure of Things*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 353.

makes it clear that solidarity with others has nothing to do with arbitrary and changeable allegiances to an interest group. She argues that while traditions are always open and allow for both movement and play, their shared practices and common texts facilitate a staying power or permanence that endures for decades and even centuries.” Her argument implies that solidarity within a tradition can in some ways be marked out by shared practices, texts, and teachings but they are portals to a deeper and more fundamental solidarity. The offer entry into a way of being that is characterised by a vulnerability and surrender to the constituting questions that forms that path or practice. The solidarity of a religious community is not a matter of a shared doxology but of an emergent solidarity which becomes apparent that despite diversities of religious orientation all are struggling with analogous and hence shareable spiritual concerns. It is the very diversity of approaches that constitutes a “we”, a community that finds its solidarity in albeit different expressed shared concerns. Once again, the papers in this collection overlap. Nielson’s notion of “solidarity” is precisely one of those open humanistic concepts that constitutes itself in and through the diversity of its application. Nielson’s case for an ontologically discerned solidarity matches both Linden’s case for the priority of ontic-commitments in our practices and Arthos’ plea for a hermeneutics that is politically and culturally relevant in our fragmented times.

George Taylor’s presentation “*Practical Hermeneutics: The Legal Text and Beyond*” endeavours to demonstrate the continuing practical relevance of hermeneutics through the example of legal interpretation. The paper examines the very concrete nature of legal hermeneutics within everyday legal practice – the interrelation of meaning and application – and endeavours to show how legal hermeneutics, and hermeneutics more generally, offers what Ricoeur calls an interpretive “choice in favour of meaning.” Taylor’s speaks to many of the formal difficulties that confront hermeneutics considered theoretically – incommensurability, incompleteness, openness of domain – and demonstrates that within the practical constraints of legal debate these technical features of hermeneutics actually extend the scope of understanding. The argument Taylor builds reflects a small but highly significant passage towards the end of *Truth and Method* in which Gadamer laments the distorting and reductive power of statemental language: “Any one who has experienced an interrogation – even if only as a witness – knows what it is to make a statement and how little it is a statement of what one means. In a statement the horizon of meaning of what is to be said is concealed by methodological exactness ... meaning thus reduced to what is stated is always

distorted meaning.”⁵ In the arguments of Arthos, and Chiurazzi we have seen how an awareness of the finitude of understanding and an appreciation of its linguistic limits does not so much curtail the range of understanding as open up its speculative dimensions and, hence, other un-anticipated possibilities for insight. The practical import of Taylor’s argument is clear: the task of legal representation is not so much to get behind the statement as to appreciate the fuller speculative context which informs any statement. Taylor is right to stress Gadamer’s remarks on ‘the exemplary significance of legal hermeneutics’ for hermeneutics generally.⁶ Because legal hermeneutics knows that no judgement can be taken as definitive, it is always committed to seek for a fuller complete understanding. In these fractious times Taylor argues, hermeneutics itself becomes exemplary: it knows that meaning is not given but that our humanity depends upon its undying pursuit.

Nicholas Davey

University of Dundee.

⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1989, p. 469

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1989, p. 324.